

## **Early Voting's Popularity Is Not Universal**

Cost concerns and administrative challenges have prompted restrictions, slowed expansion

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Hordes of voters took advantage of convenience voting options in 2004 in the more than 30 states that allowed it, with one-fifth of the American electorate casting their ballots before Election Day in person or by mail.

But the popularity of early voting is not universal among lawmakers and election administrators. Logistical and financial concerns have prompted legislatures in several states to pass measures to restrict the practice or to reject plans to allow or expand it.

Election officials have their concerns as well.

Early voting, which some officials point to as a potential solution to long lines at the polls on Election Day, proved more popular than ever in the 2004 election. The estimated 20 percent of voters who cast ballots before Election Day either in person or by mail represents a 14 percent jump from 2000, according to a survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Florida was one state that could be largely responsible for the jump. The Sunshine State permitted early voting for the first time in 2004. Nearly 20 percent of the state's voters cast their ballots early with many voters braving lines much longer the week before November 2 than they would have on it.

The long lines, particularly in South Florida, led some election officials to push legislators for longer hours and more sites for early voting. But to no avail. A recently passed bill, (H.B. 1567) which awaits Gov. Jeb Bush's signature, did the opposite, limiting early voting hours.

The bill restricts early voting hours during the week to eight hours per day. The current law allows for early voting locations to be open for at least eight hours. Polling locations stayed open longer than that in a number of Florida counties in 2004 to allow those waiting in line at the end of the day to cast ballots.

Lori Hudson, deputy elections administrator for Pinellas County, said she was "disappointed" by the legislature's restrictions on early voting, which she said helps her office run elections more smoothly. "[Early voting] helps take the pressure off the polls on Election Day," she said. "We find [the bill] restrictive."

Kurt Browning, supervisor of elections in Pasco County and legislative committee chair of the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections, agreed. "Supervisors are not pleased with

the bill. We would like to have more flexibility," he said.

The administration of early voting does pose challenges, however.

"You need a considerable amount of space. There are staffing and equipment requirements. Preparations for elections must be completed sooner," Browning said. However, Browning says counties are up for the challenge. "We embrace early voting."

In Illinois, election officials have had a more measured response to early voting. They are wary of proposed early voting legislation, but mostly for cost reasons.

Bills currently under deliberation in Springfield would allow no-excuse early voting up to three weeks before Election Day. According to Robert Saar, executive director of the DuPage County Election Commission and president of the Association of Election Commission Officials of Illinois, election officials in the state are split on the legislation.

"Counties are concerned about the manpower and financial requirements," Saar said.

Saar said he was not opposed to the concept of early voting, but he was concerned by the lack of clarity in the legislation. "We need to have the maximum amount of flexibility. We need to let the state know what we need administratively."

The costs of administering early voting are a concern in Missouri as well.

Several bills, including separate efforts by Republican Gov. Matt Blunt and Democratic Secretary of State Robin Carnahan to expand early voting, failed this year.

Carnahan's plan would have allowed early voting for six weeks, not something election officials relish according to Rich Chrismer, St. Charles County clerk and a member of the Missouri County Clerk and Election Authorities Association's legislative committee.

"The legislation provided no funding. Clerks would prefer a shorter early voting period because of the cost issue," said Chrismer.

Not all early voting efforts failed, however. The National Conference of State Legislatures' Web site indicates that legislation is pending in 11 states.